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Filipina Domestic Workers, Violent Insecurity, Testimonial Theatre and Transnational Ambivalence

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Abstract: From conventional social scientific interview material, we have developed a testimonial play that focuses on the intimate violence of a state-regulated temporary worker program in Canada. Taking the play to the Philippines has raised questions about the contextuality of interpretation. How easily do our scholarly narratives travel between global north and south? How might we use our research to stage nuanced transnational conversations about issues that are experienced differently in different places?

Key words: Philippines, migrant domestic workers, Canada, testimonial theatre

November 16, 2013. We are sitting in a rehearsal studio at the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) Theatre in Manila working on the final scene of our testimonial play, in which a representative of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Philippine Foreign Affairs each has an opportunity to present and legitimate their government's perspective on Canada's Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). The words of the CIC representative have been written for the play but those of the Philippine governmental representative are taken verbatim from a research transcript, as is the case for all other monologues and dialogues in

the play.ⁱ At this moment, the director and actors are working on the following short segment:

Citizenship and Immigration Canada Rep (CIC):

[.....] The federal government recognizes there are difficulties associated with the LCP. But it's also important to recognize the benefits [...] to Filipinos. [...] The World Bank and many academics now believe that the money sent home as remittances is a more effective means of stimulating the Philippines economy than more traditional forms of development aid.

Philippine Foreign Affairs Rep:

If I may, I would like to clarify something. It has never been the policy of the Philippine government to send domestic workers abroad. [...] Now if they choose to go out of the country to work we need to cope with this. [...] Of course the Philippines doesn't have all the resources to cover everything and attend to all the needs of these people. But if we compare the Philippines' performance with its neighbours, we are doing a lot more. In migration circles, our government is a model for other labour-sending countries. But it is not the policy to send domestic workers abroad. It is a personal choice to leave the country.

CIC: Exactly! [...] Shouldn't individual Filipinos have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether this is a good or bad program?

Helping the actors to more fully realize their characters, the Director asked whether the governmental representatives are saying the same or different things. Sitting on the sidelines it's tempting to think: 'It's the same rhetoric of personal choice. It's neoliberalism twice over.' What the actors had to say is far more interesting. Lex Marcos, a Manila-based Filipino actor, thought that his character was divided and concerned; Patrick Keating, from Vancouver, felt that the CIC representative was singularly boosterish about his government program. Abstracting the two perspectives to a cliché of neoliberalism strips them of their emotional nuance and interpretative complexity. This moment of insight – and many others like it – has been afforded by the opportunity to stage our testimonial play, *Nanay*, in the Philippines.ⁱⁱ

The play was created in Canada from research into the structural violence associated with the LCP, one of Canada's temporary foreign worker programs (Pratt, 2004; 2012). Alongside the scene just described, actors performing as Filipino domestic workers narrate intimate stories of their suffering as domestic workers, while others present Canadian employers' very real stresses in the absence of a national child or elder care policy. The play was created in Vancouver and performed without major modification in Berlin; the occasion of bringing it to the Philippines has prompted us to think carefully about whether and how narratives of intimate insecurity travel (Johnston and Pratt, 2014).

Lex's intuited ambivalence about the LCP, placed against a singularity of the Canadian's interpretation, crystallizes a simmering debate among scholars and policy makers: in contrast to the CIC representative's enthusiasm for the LCP, Canadian researchers tend to be uniformly negative about the program, emphasizing the exploitation and vulnerability of live-in caregivers as precarious workers in Canada. Scholars writing from outside of Canada have argued that this kind of critique betrays a narrow and Eurocentric perspective. Daniel Bell and Nicola Piper believe that liberal democratic theorists in the global north often ignore the actual needs and interests of migrants because they frame questions of justice from within their own context. Similarly, Deirdre McKay argues that critiques of family separation imposed by programs such as the LCP betray Eurocentric middle-class norms of family and intimacy. In the area of the Philippines that she has researched, she argues that there is nothing particularly new, violent or damaging about parents leaving their children in the care of extended kin.

Bringing our play (and research) to the Philippines responds to Nancy Fraser's (2009) call for a more intimate (and just) geopolitics by reconfiguring the scales and spaces of politics so that public dialogue includes all of those subjected to a particular governance regime. In her view, too often deliberations about justice are mis-framed geographically and those who should be heard are excluded. Our intuition from travelling with *Nanay* is that such dialogues will be halting because issues worthy of scholarly attention can look very different depending on context, across the global north and south. Our methodological challenge as scholars, it seems to us, is to create the kinds of research outputs that can foster and sustain

nuanced possibly ambivalent transnational conversations, ones that can hold a critique of the structural violence associated with the LCP together with the possibility that the LCP is one of the best programs of its kind and the Philippine state is a model migrant-sending country. This is not a position of cultural relativism; it is a call to use our research to stage complex conversations that might open new ways of thinking about the complexities and contradictions that lie before us.

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ⁱ For more details see Johnston and Pratt 2010; Pratt and Johnston 2013.

ⁱⁱ We deeply appreciate receiving a SSHRC Public Outreach Grant and ESRC Knowledge Exchange Grant, which have allowed us to do this.